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AUTHOR Beckman, Aileen K.
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ABSTRACT

To perceive the incongruous in fiction, children must have internalized the events of the everyday world. Then they can appreciate the kind of joke "frame" (or pattern) that exists in literature. Elements of humor were tested in a study of eight and nine year old children in England and the United States--22 in each country. Selections from eight books were read orally to each of eight groups, with each selection being an entire episode. The children were given a synopsis of each narrative in order to acquaint them with the main theme of the story. After each selection was read, the children were asked, "What, if anything, did you find funny in that story?" Results of the taped responses indicated that the incongruous appearance, actions, and discourse of characters evoked more humorous responses than books focusing primarily on either situational or language humor. In the two stories that rely on character humor, the main characters were animals familiar from funny books. The frame is thus familiar, unlike situational humor where each narrative centers its story around a different theme. The more explicit the situational frame the more readily it was identified as humorous by the children. The group as a whole also contributed to the recognition of the humorous frame. (EL)

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Aileen K. Beckman PhD

The Psychology of Humor and Children's Funny Books: Where Do They Meet?

Incongruity, or the mismatched pairings of ideas or situations that are divergent from customary patterns, has been identified as the earliest type of humor recognized by children(McGhee, 1971,77;Shultz, 1972,76) and is the basis for much of the humor found in children's books. Acknowledging that the recognition of an incongruity involves cognitive skills, meaning how children logically think, we ask what other elements cause the child to 'get the joke?' I submit that the recognition of the 'frame,' the acceptable convention known to others, is the key to the appreciation of humor of incongruity. When six year old Johnny asks,"When is a door not a door?" and responds, "When it is ajar," he laughs uproariously. Upon further questioning, it becomes clear that Johnny has no idea what a door being 'ajar' means, but is responding to the sort of joke 'frame' that is prevalent in his peer group. Although the young child may not resolve the incongruity, he recognizes the frame and responds positively.

To perceive the incongruous, to notice when things are not matching, the child must have internalized the events of the everyday world in order to recognize the incongruous in the fictive. Once this condition exists, the child is free to appreciate the incongruous and the frame in which it exists in literature.

In a study of humor in children's literature, character, situation and discourse were isolated as the primary elements in humorous fiction. One of these categories is dominant in each story, although the others are often present. The story becomes funny if the people act oddly, the events turn out strangely or the words play with conventional meaning. Humor of character, as in Pippi Longstocking(Astrid Lindgren), relies

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on the child's sense of the commonplace to make the fictive laughable. Pippi, a zany, red-headed whirlwind, becomes increasingly ridiculous as her words and actions remove her farther from the everyday world. Paddington Bear(Michael Bond), a bear who speaks yet retains his animal characteristics, is funny because, although he moves in a realistic world, the child knows it is a world of fantasy. The humor in Paddington also lies in the reader's not knowing where the bounds of fantasy or reality lie. The child knows the boundary between the real and the fictive, but doesn't know where the author will set it. That, in effect, is the 'surprise' dominant in all humorous literature.

Situational humor creates an incongruity by proposing an absurdly incongruous condition. A penguin in the house, followed by a lady penguin and lots of baby penguins? Funny, why? An incongruous situation that is calmly accepted by the human family accentuating its absurdity (Mr. Popper's Penguins, Richard and Florence Atwater). Cognizant of the fact that the everyday world is not populated with people who raise penguins, the child sees the paradoxical situation. A shrinking boy - an illogical plight at odds with the commonsense - sets the tone for an irrational romp through a fantasy imposed upon by reality (The Shrinking of Treehorn, Florence Parry Heide). His plaintive bids for attention to his predicament leave the adults in his world unawakened. His comic misadventures are a series of incongruous events heightened by the conventional responses of the adults surrounding him.

> 'Well, I'll let it go for today,' said his teacher.
> 'But see that it's taken care of before tomorrow.
> We don't shrink in this class.

Incongruities are found not only in characterizations or situations, but in discourse as well. Humorous discourse appears in four forms: distortion, repetition or dialect, puns and jokes, and derogatory remarks or name-calling. Classic language puns are found in Alice (Lewis Carroll) where language is parodied until the familiar becomes discrepant.

> ....'and the different Branches of Arithmetic-
> Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision.'

Funny, yes, but only to the child who knows what the four branches of arithmetic really are. The same holds true for Carroll's poetic parodies: 'Against Idleness and Mischief' parodied on Isaac Watts' 'Against Quarreling and Fighting,' and 'Would you walk a little faster,' parodied on Mary Howlett's poem, 'Would you walk into my parlour.' Their illogical texts can only fully be appreciated by children who are familiar with the originals.

Language puns are sprinkled liberally throughout my selection of children's books. Helen Cresswell, in Ordinary Jack, deftly employs spoonerisms to triumph with 'The Day Zero Piddled While Home Burned,' to describe a hapless mongrel's activity. Grimble (Clement Freud) recalls a joke about humming:

> 'Do you know why humming birds hum? Because they don't know the words.'

Ramona the Pest (Beverly Cleary) confuses 'for the present' meaning now with 'for the present' meaning gift and sets off a series of irreconcilable thoughts and actions confusing not only herself but those around her.

Derogatory remarks and name-calling appear in some of the books in my study: Annabel's brother is 'ape-face,' (Freaky Friday, Mary Rodgers), Miss Whitehead has 'feet like skis,' (Harriet the Spy, Louise Fitzhugh), and 'Jack swims with the approximate grace and agility of an elephant' (Ordinary Jack, Helen Cresswell). This is the most frequent kind of humor of language indulged in by children themselves. The author simply does it better as a kind of metaphor, that is the literary form of the same genre.

These elements were tested in a study with eight and nine year old children in England and the United States, twenty-two children in each country. The selections were read orally to each group. There were eight groups, six containing three children and two containing two children. Eight books were used, four presented to half of the children and four to the other half. Each selection was an entire episode, sometimes a portion of a chapter, sometimes an entire chapter. The children were given a synopsis of each narrative in order to acquaint them with the main theme of the story. After the reading of each selection, the children were asked the following question: 'What, if anything, did you find funny in that story?' The responses of the children were taped.

The books used were: The Wombles (Elizabeth Beresford), Paddington Helps Out (Michael Bond), character humor; Freaky Friday (Mary Rodgers), Harriet the Spy (Louise Fitzhugh), Grimble (Clement Freud), Homer Price (Robert McCloskey) all situational humor; and The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland (Lewis Carroll), humor centered on discourse.

Individual responses to character humor was heaviest: 26 for Paddington and 22 for The Wombles. The closest situational humor in number of single responses were Freaky Friday and Grimble with 16 each. The children identified the primary comic situation in each of the books based on humor of situation. Beyond that, the comments concerning the humor referred to either the actions or language of the characters.

Alice, the only narrative where humor is based on discourse, was the recipient of 15 individual responses, all but one identifying puns and jokes. Group responses to humorous discourse was heaviest in the area of puns and jokes (50), followed by derogatory remarks and name-calling (25), and distortion, repetition, and dialect (9). Parody was not present in any of the selections.

Results indicate that the incongruous appearance, actions and discourse of characters evoke more humorous responses than either books focusing primarily on situational or language humor. In both stories relying on character humor, the main characters were animals whose appearance as characters in funny books has long been established. The 'frame' is a familiar one unlike the situational humor where each narrative centers its story around a different theme. The more explicit the situational 'frame' the more readily it was identified as humorous by the children. The most interesting feature for a researcher are the parts of a narrative that seem funny to an adult but are not laughable to a child. Just as Jane Austen requires a deeper reading to get beneath the layers of her humor, so do some writers of children's books when the humor lies 'beneath the page' as in Ordinary Jack, which is much more difficult for the child to comprehend. The irony in Jane Austen depends on the writer and the reader sharing a common set of values, in her case, the social behavior and morals of the landed middle classes. What set of values do young readers share with an author? The answer for me is the set the author puts forth for scrutiny. In Ordinary Jack, Helen Cresswell is saying,'which would you rather be?' 'Who is the oddball in this horde?' The family thinks it is Jack, what does the reader think? The 'deeper reading' is a simple question of not taking what is said at face value. So it's not just an ordinary boy in an extraordinary family that the writer has offered, but a chance to identify with one or the other, making the rejected alternative laughable. However the children in my study viewed Jack more often as sad rather than funny. Taking the author's words at face value, they failed to see the humor in the juxtaposition of

Jack and his family. The move from sad to funny requires an understanding of the generality of the commonplace, a frame not yet developed by the young who judge each case on its individual merits.

I have pursued the incongruous from the joke to the humorous narrative. There is a natural relationship in the frame that must be learned before either is recognized as humorous. The group, as a natural influence on children's responses and attitudes, also is responsible for the recognition of the humorous frame. None of these would be possible without the child's understanding of where his world of reality ends and the fictive world of fantasy begins.

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